Abstract

This article presents a critical overview of changes in the position and public image of Italian that have occurred within both the Italo-Australian community and broader Australian society during almost fifty years of mass migration from Italy. It argues that the language dynamics involving Italian have been, and still are, complex and multidirectional, and that a multiplicity of perspectives is therefore needed to give an account of the sociolinguistic processes that have taken place. The article also explores some new trends that have emerged since the mid-1990s and indicate that a cultural – and possibly also linguistic – revival is taking place among younger generations, which may modify some of the language patterns of previous years. The analysis takes into account the relationship between processes occurring at the community level on one hand and in the educational domain on the other. The concluding section suggests areas of research and initiatives which could support the new trends and reinforce and expand the position of Italian in Australia.

1 Introduction

This article presents a critical overview of changes in the position and public image of Italian that have occurred within both the Italo-Australian community and broader Australian society during almost fifty years of mass migration from Italy. Understanding these developments in the social and linguistic environment in which we operate is essential if innovations in our Italian teaching are to be effective.

My general argument is that the language dynamics involving Italian have been, and still are, complex and multidirectional, and that a multiplicity of perspectives is therefore needed to give account of the sociolinguistic processes that have taken place. While up to the early 1990s all indicators seemed to point to the inevitable decline of the Italian language among the younger Italo-Australian generations, since the mid-1990s new trends have started to emerge, indicating a cultural and linguistic revival that may modify the language patterns of previous decades to some extent. My analysis also takes into account the role that Italian has played and is still playing in the Australian educational domain, as well as the relationship between processes occurring at the community level on one hand and in the educational domain on the other. In conclusion I suggest some linguistic initiatives and new directions for research which could support the recent trends and serve to reinforce and expand the position of Italian in Australia, especially in education.

2 The years of mass migration

Mass migration from Italy to Australia took place from the early 1950s until the end of the 1960s. The peak was reached in the decade 1951-1961, when an average of almost
18,000 new migrants arrived every year (Castles 1992). If we take into account Italy’s sociolinguistic situation in those decades, we can assume that the hundreds of thousands of migrants who arrived here, mainly from small rural centres and the most depressed regions of Italy at the time (Sicily, Calabria, Veneto, Campania), spoke Dialect as their first language and Italian as their second.

However, the dialectophone nature of Italian migrants as monolinguals has at times been overestimated and their knowledge of Italian underestimated. In fact, the number of dialect monolinguals who arrived in Australia can be estimated to have been low, for at least two reasons: firstly, migrants are generally upwardly mobile people, and hence highly sensitive to the prestige of Italian (Bettoni & Gibbons 1988:16); and secondly, migration generally promotes a process of italianisation, since it brings people from different regions into contact with each other (De Mauro 1970).

The italianisation process was helped by successive waves of migrants, by commercial activities and enterprises set up by Italians, and by the lack of English proficiency that was prevalent in the Italo-Australian community at the time. In the 1950s and 1960s Italian children grew up in closely-knit communities where both Dialect and Italian were widely spoken, and had therefore the possibility of developing both languages while learning English. These are the trilingual people who are now in their forties and fifties.

Un fortunately the process of italianisation has not been studied systematically, as the early interest of scholars was caught instead by the more conspicuous process of anglicisation, which resulted from Italian-English contact. Thus, the first studies focused on the changes that occurred in the Italian language of first-generation migrants under pressure from the new English-language environment, and on lexical transference in particular, including the well known items such as *il carro* and *la fenza* from the English *car* and *fence* (Rando 1968).

What of the position of Italian in the educational domain – and in Australian society as a whole – during these years of mass migration? Following the French and German examples, Italian was first introduced into most Australian universities and secondary schools as a ‘language of culture’, with curricula which had a strong literary and grammatical emphasis. Italian was taught primarily as a key to access Italy’s rich literary, artistic and musical heritage, and foreign language study was meant to be for the élite. The content of courses was of very little relevance to the increasing numbers of young Italian migrants who were choosing Italian as a subject for examination (Totaro 1987). Thus, the years of mass migration were characterised by a wide gap between, on one side, the language(s) brought by Italian migrants and, on the other, the image that Italian had in the school and university context. As a language of culture it was distant from the reality and needs of the migrants’ children.

Nonetheless, the presence of Italian migrants gradually contributed to a number of sociolinguistic processes. First of all, Italians established their own Saturday schools in order to promote the study of Italian language and culture among their children. In his in-depth account of language policy in Australia, Ozolins acknowledges the role played by migrants in the promotion of their own languages. With regard to Italian, he quotes an article by McCormick stating that “the teaching of Italian to Italian children was not an idea invented by language teachers, but an idea that had been raised by the Italian
community itself” (cited in Ozolins 1993:93). Ozolins also singles out the Italian community as the one that, as early as the 1960s, “was itself defining an issue and raising it before the broader Australian community”, which represented an important step forward from the 1950s debate on “what to do with migrants” (1993:94).

During the 1970s Australia moved from the assimilationist policy of the 1950s to a multicultural policy, through which linguistic and cultural diversity was acknowledged, respected and promoted. It must be remembered that this evolution did not occur solely as a process directed from above. In the main it resulted from the struggles conducted by ethnic communities – on the grounds of social justice, cultural rights and equality of opportunity – to have their languages introduced into the public education system, primarily to support language maintenance among the younger generations. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s Italo-Australians were at the forefront of these struggles (Ozolins 1993). The term ‘community languages’ began to be used for migrants’ languages, in acknowledgement of the fact that they are spoken in – and therefore belong to – this country, alongside Aboriginal languages and English.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s many Australian states finally decided to introduce the teaching of community languages into the curricula of their primary schools. So from then on, Italian was present in the educational domain with the double image of community language and language of culture.

3 Italian as a community language

The 1980s was a very important decade for all community languages, and for Italian in particular, as “the push for the recognition of Community Languages greatly advanced its position in schools and tertiary institutions” (Clyne 1994:125). Two major trends can be outlined:

1) an extraordinary expansion of Italian in schools and universities, accompanied by a very lively debate about the right label to be given to the language;
2) at community level, an acceleration in the process of language shift among the Italian second generation, which was analysed in the numerous sociolinguistic studies that appeared in that decade.

3.1 Growth of Italian in the educational domain

During the 1980s Italian became, in terms of number of students, the most studied language other than English in Australia, with an estimated overall number of students between 230,000 and 260,000 in 1988 (Di Biase 1989:189). However, this expansion occurred mainly at primary school level (which accounted for 70% of the student body), through the ‘Insertion classes’ run by community organisations, while it was more modest at secondary and university levels (having 28% and 2% of the students, respectively).

Furthermore, during the 1980s the role of Italian at primary level gradually changed, compared with that of other community languages, since the vast majority of pupils were not of Italian background. In fact, as part of the efforts to convince education authorities of the value of language learning within the curriculum, Italian was
increasingly promoted as the most suitable second language to be learnt by all Australian school children, regardless of their backgrounds.

The expansion of Italian at school was accompanied by lively discussions as to the appropriate label to be attached to the language. On one hand, Italian was promoted by some community leaders as the community language par excellence, in so far as it was the most spoken language other than English in Australia, according to census data. On the other hand, there were those who objected even to the very notion of community languages, maintaining that a language should be chosen as a curriculum subject on intellectual and cultural grounds only (Quinn 1981). Still others, more cautiously, suggested that, although the recognition of Italian as una lingua della comunità and no longer a foreign language had been a step forward, it was unwise to encourage its study only for this reason (Carsaniga 1984). Finally, the promoters of Italian as a suitable second language for all students stressed that Italian was favoured by its ‘learnability’ for English speakers, the culture associated with it, its economic and international value and, ironically, the size of its community (Lo Bianco 1989).

Thus, at the end of the 1980s, Italian presented three different – and at times conflicting – images: language of culture; community language; and second language for all Australians. Attempts were made to reconcile these different images in the overall interest of the language, at a time when the federal government started to divert its attention and funds towards some of the languages of neighbouring Asian countries. According to Lo Bianco (1989), it was in the interests of Italian to capitalise on its five main assets; that is, on being:

- an Australian language
- an easily-learned language
- a cultural language
- a well-connected language (that is, one that gives access to sibling languages, such as Spanish and French in the case of Italian)
- a commercial language.

3.2 Decline of Italian in home use

The 1980s also saw sociolinguistic studies about the Italo-Australian community flourish, both at macro and micro levels. The research focused on language shift, the process of anglicisation among first and second generations, language erosion among the second generation and attitudes towards Italian and dialects.

Clyne (1982) used Australian census data relative to the question on regular language use to explore the major socio-demographic factors that correlate to a higher or lower use of the language. Even allowing for some inflation in the data, in 1976 Italian was the most spoken language other than English, with 444,672 speakers and a relatively low rate of shift (6.26% among the first generation; 18.6% among the second generation of intraethnic marriages). Ten years later, in 1986, the number of speakers was 415,765, and the rate of shift had increased slightly among the first generation (10.5%) but much more among the second (29.3%) (Clyne 1991).

At the micro-sociolinguistic level, Bettoni (1981) was the first to study the process of anglicisation systematically, through well defined samples, with a clear analytical framework, and at linguistic levels other than the lexical. Further studies (Bettoni 1985;
Rubino 1987) explored correlations of types and amount of transfers with demographic, sociological and linguistic factors (for example, year of arrival in Australia, age at the time of migration and type of linguistic task).

Studies of the language of the second generation focused on the subjects’ limited active proficiency in Italian and Dialect in an interview situation. This was displayed, for example, by their high and non-systematic variability between Italian and Dialect forms and their use of extensive code-switching from Italian or Dialect to English to compensate for lexical gaps and overcome linguistic incompetence (Bettoni 1985, 1986; Rubino 1987).

Language attitudes held by Italo-Australians were also analysed, using the social psychology paradigm (Bettoni & Gibbons 1988; Hogg et al. 1989). It was found that, particularly among first-generation migrants, negative attitudes towards the main language varieties spoken in the community – Dialect and English/Dialect or English/Italian mixtures – were quite widespread.

The studies regarding language shift and language loss among Italo-Australians continued well into the 1990s. A comparison between the 1991 and 1996 census data showed that the number of Italian speakers decreased by 10.3%, from 418,804 to 375,752 (Clyne & Kipp 1997). The rates of shift also continued to increase: from 11.2% to 14.7% among the first generation and from 49.8% to 57.9% among the second generation taken as a whole (or 42.6% for the children of intraethnic marriages only). So, although Italian was still the community language with the highest number of home speakers, its numbers appeared to have been declining steadily throughout the decade 1986-1996. It must be noted, however, that by considering only the home domain, these figures underestimated the use of Italian by the second generation, many of whom no longer lived with their parents.

The general trends shown in the census data were confirmed, and at the same time refined, in a small-scale study carried out in Sydney by Bettoni and Rubino (1996) among Sicilians and Venetians. Unlike the census, this study clearly distinguished between Italian, Dialect and English, and investigated language use in various domains: at home, at work, in shops, with friends and with oneself.

Language loss was also investigated from an ethnographic perspective, by Rubino (1993, 1996, 2000) and Cavallaro (1998). The last stages of language erosion among the second generation were found to be characterised by highly variable language mixing, simplification, hypercorrections and frequent hesitation markers. In these stages it is common to find that communication in the family occurs in a bilingual mode, with the parents speaking Italian and/or Dialect and the children using English extensively. In this situation Dialect and Italian no longer have any communicative function for the children, but are limited to a kind of phatic or expressive function (Rubino 2000).

This proliferation of studies in different paradigms led to a deeper understanding of the process of language shift in ethnic communities generally, as well as specifically among Italians. The quantitative method adopted by Clyne (1982, 1991) singled out some major socio-demographic factors which could explain the different rates of language shift displayed by ethnic groups. For Italo-Australians, demographic concentration, generation, gender, age and marriage patterns appear to be particularly significant in
determining shift. That is, the shift to English is faster in those states with a lower concentration of Italian migrants, as well as among the second generation, men, younger speakers of the first generation and older ones of the second, and those in exogamous marriages. These factors offset some characteristics of the community that would otherwise favour language maintenance, such as overall numerical strength.

The process of shift has also been explained in the light of some sociocultural factors. In the case of Italo-Australians, the relatively small cultural distance from the dominant Anglo-Australian group has been singled out as a particularly influential factor. For, although Italians do not reach the high degree of affinity with the dominant group that characterises, for example, the Dutch or the Germans, they still share with the dominant group a western type of culture that favours not only their integration into Australian society but also, indirectly, language shift. Thus, cultural distance can explain, for instance, the higher rate of language maintenance among Greeks than Italians, in spite of the many socio-demographic similarities between the two groups (Bettoni & Rubino 1996:149-150).

Another factor leading to shift was identified by Smolicz (1981), who considered the effects of an ethnic group’s specific sociocultural characteristics, or ‘core values’. For Italians, ‘family’ rather than ‘language’ seems to be a core value, while for other groups, such as Greeks and Chinese people, language appears to play a much more crucial role (Chiro and Smolicz 1994).

Finally, linguistic factors also contribute to explaining language shift. Among Italo-Australians, the most influential of these appeared to be the negative attitudes held by migrants towards the language varieties that they themselves speak or that are most spoken in the community, particularly dialects and language mixtures (Bettoni & Gibbons 1988, Hogg et al. 1989).

Overall, then, the major studies conducted up to the early 1990s indicated that Italian and Dialect in Australia were in a precarious situation. In the transition from the first to the second generation, both were being lost fairly rapidly, in spite of the presence of community characteristics conducive to language maintenance. The shift was particularly high in some domains, especially in the home, the one domain generally considered crucial to intergenerational maintenance of a language. Furthermore, negative language attitudes, widespread in the essentially dialectophone community, seemed to accelerate the process.

4 From the mid-1990s to date

While the 1980s and early 1990s saw a decline in Italian and Dialect use in the home accompanied by the growth of Italian in the educational context, different trends have been observable since the mid-1990s. As far as education is concerned, the expansion of the previous decade has either come to a halt or continued at a very slow rate, at least in the major states. At primary level, the overall number of students has remained fairly stable; at junior secondary level, it has decreased slightly or remained stable, thanks to new policies such as the compulsory 100 and 200 hours of language study in NSW; and at senior secondary level it has decreased markedly.
For example, in NSW government primary schools, the number of pupils studying Italian has remained fairly stable: 31,260 in 1995 and 31,444 in 1998. The number completing year 10 in Italian (either 100 or 200 hrs) has increased slightly: from 1,490 in 1994 to 1,566 in 1998 and 1,653 in 2000 (although the proportion of those doing 100 rather than 200 hours has increased). At the same time, there has been a considerable fall in enrolments in year 12: from 732 in 1991 to 687 in 1994 and 564 in 1999; and the candidates actually sitting for the Higher School Certificate in Italian at the end of each year may have been even fewer (Board of Studies New South Wales, www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au).

In Victoria, between 1994 and 1999 the number of students increased from 98,588 to 143,430 in primary schools (both government and non-government), but decreased at junior secondary level in both systems from 51,024 to 45,021. In 1999 only 776 students sat for the Victorian Certificate of Education, and even fewer, 737, were enrolled in year 12 in 2000 (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, www.vcaa.vic.edu.au).

At tertiary level, the number of institutions offering accredited programmes in Italian decreased from thirty-one in 1988 to twenty-six in 1990 and twenty in 1995. Despite some further closures, this number remained stable up to 2000, thanks to the creation of new programmes in other universities (Hajek 2000).

While these figures, along with the 1996 census data (reported above) would seem to point to a further weakening of the position of the Italian language in Australia, new and positive trends have emerged outside the domains of home and school. In the remainder of this paper I will argue that the position of Italian has diversified during the 1990s, so that it occupies new spaces which are not recorded in the available data. Italian may have taken on a new role in the lives of many Italo-Australians, if not in their homes. A cultural – and possibly also linguistic – revival is taking place among younger generations, which may lead to changes in the sociolinguistic patterns outlined above.

The three new trends I discuss below are: the development of a new identity among second-generation Italians; increasing contact between Italy and Australia; and the rise in prestige and popularity of Italian culture and language in Australian society as a whole. As there has been little empirical research so far to explore these new trends, much of the material presented is based upon small research projects or observations, and needs to be further tested.

4.1 A new identity for the second generation?

The development of a new identity among second-generation migrants in general – not just Italians – has been widely reported. In the early 1990s it was already noted that, as a reflection of the multicultural climate, it was common for young people to use their parents’ nationalities or hyphenated identities, referring to themselves as Italo-Australian, Greek-Australian or Dutch-Australian (Bennett 1997; O’Connor 1994; Tamis 1991; Vasta 1992). Bennett went so far as to say: “Indeed, many Australian-born adults who come from a non-English-speaking background seem to feel that their linguistic and cultural background is preferable to a monolingual, monocultural Anglo-Celtic background” (1997:51).
O’Connor (1994) explored the impact of a journey to Italy on the identity and language experience of second-generation Italians, and the majority of his informants considered themselves to be Italian or Italian-Australian. The dynamic construction of *italianità* was explored in an ethnographic study by Baldassar (1992) among a group of young Italo-Australian people in Perth, focusing on their use of space, types of networks and clothes.

Several readily observable phenomena point to the formation and affirmation of an Italo-Australian identity and culture among the second and third generations. These include:

- the growth of Italo-Australian youth clubs (including those created on a regional basis through the assistance of Italian regional governments). These are now extremely common, at least in Sydney and Melbourne, and their social events are widely publicised and very well attended;
- the existence of clearly identifiable ‘hang-outs’ for young people, such as particular streets and cafés;
- the popularity of Italo-Australian icons, such as comedians Joe Avati and John Barresi, as well as Italo-Australian singers, films and books (for example, *Looking for Alibrandi*).

Anecdotal evidence abounds. For example, I have heard second-generation parents express great surprise at a strong affirmation of ethnic identity by their third-generation adolescent children, since they remember vividly how ashamed they were, at the same age, of being Italian. This display of ethnic identity is clearly manifested in school playgrounds, where the appellations *wog* and *skip* are still used.

Recently, Migliorino conducted a small qualitative research project with young third-generation Italians. He concluded that “there is both a discernable and accessible Italo-Australian culture that young third generation children can opt into and are doing so in large numbers” (2000:421). His informants’ Italianness was defined by certain experiences and behaviours, such as physical appearance or going to a particular coffee shop, as well as by specific values, including ‘family’. Furthermore, like the parents referred to above, Migliorino specifically contrasted his own generation of Italo-Australians, who “lived lives of multiple behaviours being Italian with family and community and Australian in the external environment ...” (2000:426), with this new generation, which has instead defined its own identity and can maintain it in all situations.

While the existence of an Italo-Australian identity and culture seems widely attested and accepted, what can be said about the role of the Italian language in this new identity? It has been claimed that, for the second and third generations, having an Italian or Italo-Australian identity does not necessarily imply need of the Italian language, since young people’s constructed identity can have more salient elements than language (for example, Baldassar 1992, 2000). But I believe that more research is needed, to specifically explore the links between language and the identity that new generations are forging for themselves.

Some of the limited data currently available on this issue suggest that many young Italo-Australians do consider knowledge of the Italian language to contribute to their Italian identity. For example, Chiro and Smolicz (1993, 1994) report that among their
informants – university students of Italian background – there is a very high rate of Italian use, particularly among the “biculturals” and “italophiles” (those students displaying positive evaluations of Italo-Australian cultural values), compared with the “anglo-assimilates” and “hybrid monists”, (those conforming to the dominant group or critical of Italo-Australian culture). Similarly, O’Connor (1994) states that, for many of his informants, the fact that they always spoke Italian at home was the main reason for considering themselves Italian. In a study about language and cultural maintenance among second- and third-generation Italo-Australians, Pitronaci (1998) found that even those who did not speak Italian, but identified themselves as Italian or Italo-Australian, considered the language to be an important part of Italian identity and felt that it was an element they were missing. Some bilingual informants suggested that they felt more Italian than those who did not speak the language, and pointed to some differences between themselves and monolingual Italo-Australians. Pitronaci acknowledges that there is a continuum of degrees of identity, and points to age as one variable affecting the process of self-identification, as some of her subjects had refused to consider themselves Italian when they were younger. Linked to this is the notion that, according to her informants, both monolingual and bilingual, it is possible to recuperate an Italian identity through activities linked to language, such as trips to Italy, studying the language or listening to Italian music. The important role of the language in maintenance of identity and culture is also acknowledged by Migliorino (2000:424), although he does not find it essential. It is interesting to note, however, that his informants expressed the desire to have bilingual children, either through their own efforts at home or through formal education.

Two other points can be made on this issue. Firstly, it appears that Italian has acquired greater prestige among young Italo-Australians. Informal surveys among my university students have confirmed that a good Italian proficiency enjoys high prestige and elicits positive attitudes among Italo-Australian youth, even among those who do not speak it. Secondly, it is my impression that young Italo-Australians are actually exposed to more Italian in the community than is commonly thought, as they frequently find themselves in situations where Italian is widely used, such as birthday parties, weddings and sporting events. More empirical research is certainly needed in this area.

Overall, while there is limited evidence available as yet, it seems likely that a link between an Italo-Australian identity and language competence and use still exists. In the process of negotiating self-identification, (better) language competence and (higher) language use may well mark a stronger in-group membership.

4.2 Increasing contact between Australia and Italy

There is no doubt that developments in the past few years have allowed a vast number of Italo-Australians to intensify their contacts with Italy in an unprecedented manner. Contacts with Italy do not involve just trips, but also the many ways whereby Italo-Australians keep abreast of events in Italy and maintain regular contact with relatives, friends and colleagues there. By comparison with the 1980s and even the early 1990s, information about Italy is now much more accessible and abundant, thanks to more frequent and cheaper Italian newspapers, 24-hour commercial radio programmes, regular television broadcasts from Italy and, of course, the Internet. Communication with people in Italy is also much easier, thanks to cheaper telephone rates and email.
In a research project conducted in Sydney in the early 1990s (Bettoni & Rubino 1996), we found that, among second-generation informants, only 5% listened to the Italian radio station “always” or “often” (at that time only SBS radio was available), in contrast to 59% of first-generation informants. Similarly, only 37% of second-generation informants “always” or “often” watched Italian programmes on SBS television, compared with 74% among the first generation. The figures might be quite different today, with younger people following Italian programmes more, thanks to their increased availability and more targeted content. It would be interesting to investigate the impact of these new forms of communication on language maintenance among young Italo-Australians. There is no doubt that easy availability of resources plays a crucial role in language maintenance and in language learning (Fishman cited in Clyne 1991:105-6).

Of paramount importance in renewing or establishing contacts with Italian language and culture is, of course, a trip to Italy. Cheaper air fares, the fact that many first-generation Italians have now retired, the relatively prosperous economic conditions enjoyed by Italians today, and often also incentives from the Italian regional governments, allow many Italo-Australians, especially of the second generation, to visit Italy more easily and frequently than was the case for their parents and grandparents in the past.

For the first generation, a trip to Italy can be an important opportunity to re-establish contact with relatives and friends and to discover their own country. Furthermore, upon their return to Australia, the ‘Italian experience’ has a lasting impact that spreads among family and friends. For the second generation, a trip to Italy is often the event that triggers interest in Italian language and culture (Kinder 1994, Pitronaci 1998). The impact of the Italian experience on the language and, particularly, the identity of Italo-Australian youth has been well documented by O’Connor, who considers it “extremely positive for the future of the Italian community in Australia” (1994:281). Baldassar (1994) and Migliorino (2000) have also underlined the importance of these visits to Italy in shaping young people’s Italian identity in Australia. Overall, younger Italo-Australians’ contacts with Italy have not only intensified but diversified, in that many of them today forge links that only partly build upon family heritage, while going well beyond it.

Contact with Italy also includes visits by Italian relatives, who come to Australia more often and easily than in the past, thanks to the popularity that Australia enjoys as a tourist destination in Italy today. The visitors are frequently young people who come to spend some time with their relatives and can engage in a fruitful cultural and linguistic exchange with their Italo-Australian cousins.

4.3 Higher prestige of Italian culture and language in Australian society

There is no doubt that, during the 1990s, Italian features penetrated many areas of Australian life. Following its economic boom of the 1980s and rise to prominence as a major player in Europe, Italy has become a more prestigious country, projecting the image of a modern and sophisticated nation. Holidaying in Italy, and Italian products and style, have proved attractive to middle-class Australians, who lead an increasingly sophisticated lifestyle and have become more attentive to home décor and fashion. In the capital cities, the growing Italian influence has been obvious, in the numerous cafés with tables outside (which in some cases have taken the place of pubs); in the paved...
courtyards replacing lawns; in the balconies and terraces adorning the mushrooming apartments; and in the shop signs that use Italian as a marker of sophistication. This growing interest is also reflected in the Australian media, which increasingly report on aspects of Italian life. A quick search through the *Sydney Morning Herald* showed that the number of articles dealing with Italy increased from 105 in 1990 to 124 in 1995 and 151 in 2000, an increase of 44% in ten years.

It is obvious that these trends do not necessarily generate an increased demand to learn Italian. However, they can act as catalysts for greater use of the language. For instance, the increased prestige of Italian language and culture can become an incentive for language learning in so far as it encourages direct contacts with Italy. And, while an influence on lifestyle does not automatically translate into enrolment in a language course, it is a fact that positive attitudes towards a culture and its people are fundamental in promoting the learning of a particular language. Evidence of this lies in the increasing popularity of specialist study tours to Italy for Australians interested in cooking or ceramics, for example.

5 Conclusion

What do all these trends tell us about the role of Italian in Australia? Clearly, its position has changed: there has been a diversification in the space occupied by Italian in Australian society, through its spreading in some domains and shrinking in others. Within the Italo-Australian community, the communicative function of the language is shifting from the traditional domains of home and friendship to domains mainly outside the home, such as education. While for the second generation, growing up in the 1960s and 1970s, at least a passive knowledge of Italian and/or Dialect was still a necessity in order to communicate with older relatives, for many in the third generation growing up today this need no longer exists. Therefore, maintaining or learning Italian and/or Dialect has become more a matter of personal choice than a family requirement.

Nonetheless, proficiency in Italian does make a difference. In the Italo-Australian context, knowing the language enables young people to participate fully in public events held in the community. Among young Italo-Australians it takes on an expressive function, in that it can be used phatically to identify themselves as Italian or Italo-Australian, vis-a-vis youth belonging to other ethnic groups. More broadly, it allows both Italo-Australians and other learners of Italian to pursue whatever interest Italian society may offer them, and generally to forge or maintain their own links with Italy. For future generations, then, Italian should be viewed as a necessary tool, especially for maintaining the increased Italian-Australian contacts (including, but not limited to, family links) and for keeping abreast of what a modern European country such as Italy can offer young people growing up in Australia. Another relevant element, as mentioned above, is the impact of new forms of communication resulting from technological advances, which may contribute to maintaining or extending the communicative function of Italian among young people.

Why then, we must ask ourselves, does young people’s interest in the Italian language, in Italian culture and in calling themselves Italian or Italo-Australian, not translate into the will to improve their knowledge of the language by studying it formally at secondary level and/or university? The question merits research and invites reflection.
on initiatives that might be developed in order to stimulate interest in acquiring the language.

Research is needed into the sociolinguistic and sociocultural processes taking place among younger generations. Some potential topics are:

- the role of language in the negotiation of an Italian identity by Italo-Australians;
- the extent to which they are exposed to and use Italian and Dialect, not only within the Australian context but outside, through new means of communication such as email and chat rooms;
- the impact of increased access to Italian media on language proficiency;
- the elements that may trigger processes of shift reversal and language revitalisation.

One area emerging from the trends discussed above which particularly warrants further investigation is the nature of the relationship between attitudes, language proficiency and language use.

More research into the actual teaching and learning of Italian is also called for. This might examine, for example, learners’ perceptions of language curricula in terms of both content and methodology. Another area that should be explored is the acquisition of Italian as a second language in both guided and spontaneous contexts, given the high number of learners in Australia.

As far as initiatives aimed at stimulating interest in learning Italian are concerned, it is of paramount importance to ensure that the highest possible number of people, and youth in particular, whether of Italian or non-Italian origin, have frequent indirect and direct contacts with la realtà italiana. So, efforts should be made to maximise the presence in Australian society of events and exhibitions highlighting contemporary Italy – in fields such as art, music, sport, design, fashion and technology – and capitalise on the impact that these initiatives could have on young people. As Italian educators, we could act as a bridge between the cultural groups and institutions that organise such events and the new clubs and associations of young Italo-Australians, in an attempt to involve the latter in setting up these initiatives.

Regarding visits to Italy, while a great deal has been achieved by several agencies (including the Italian regional governments), especially in the creation of scholarships and exchange schemes for students and teachers, more work needs to be done, given that several of the studies canvassed above have found this to be a crucial factor. Furthermore, these opportunities should be expanded to cover a wider range of fields, through cultural, artistic, sporting, scientific, industrial and professional exchanges.

In the educational domain, we could renew and increase our lobbying to persuade authorities to raise the level of support given to language learning and teaching and to fund innovative programmes of Italian. Two high-priority targets for funding should be the provision of more bilingual immersion programmes in secondary schools and the preparation of innovative teaching materials that make use of new technology. Iagnocco (2000) outlines some interesting initiatives.
Finally, I believe that the challenge of reconciling the various images of Italian – as language of culture, community language, international and business language – has been met, to a considerable extent. Indeed, the culture exported from Italy is no longer restricted to art and literature, but covers a wide range of fields – including design, cinematography, technology and sport – that may have broader public appeal. At the same time, large sections of the Italo-Australian community, and of Australian society in general, have caught up with recent developments in Italian society and, as discussed above, are creating new links with it. The combined effect of this new multifaceted image of Italian and the processes of cultural and linguistic revival among Italo-Australians could well be to reinforce the position of Italian in Australia. These developments must be supported in a timely manner, and by the right initiatives, in order to promote the spread of Italian in Australian society and, hopefully, stimulate interest in learning it formally through the education system.

References


